

CYBERSPACE

SLICK TRICKS AND SECRETS

Five Essentials to Keeping Your Computer Alive

BY ANGIE PORTER



If you have a computer and an online service, there are five basic essentials to maintain your computer's health and your own sanity. The following free software is the obvious bare minimum of what your computer needs, Windows updates, anti-virus, a firewall, anti-spyware, and spam killers. You have been warned. If you disregard this advice, my fellow techies or I will be happy to take your money when you next have a computer problem.

This article will focus on the free; so you don't even have to think about cracking open your piggy bank. Some software is truly worth the money, pay now or pay later . . . or follow these suggestions and maybe don't pay at all.

1. Update your operating system. If you're running Windows, then scan for updates and install, at least, the critical updates. Here's the url (web address link) to Microsoft updates: <http://v4.windowsupdate.microsoft.com/en/default.asp>

Check for updates every week or two. There are no excuses such as, "I meant to, or I was going to, or I

don't know how." If you don't want to take responsibility for your computer, then give it away.

It's as simple as that.

2. Anti-virus software is a must. There are 68,000 known computer viruses that can be contracted by surfing cyberspace or received via email. That number grows every single day. I'd recommend spending a few dollars on a quality anti-virus software product such as Norton Anti-Virus or McAfee. Set the anti-virus software to update automatically and then actually use it, and scan your computer for viruses weekly.

If you can't find it in your heart to pay for protection, then there are several free online virus scanners. You can scan for viruses free online at Housecall: www.housecall.antivirus.com/housecall/start_frame.asp

For Mac users, you can find a free online virus scanner at Pure Mac: www.pure-mac.com/virus.html

3. You could benefit from both a hardware and software firewall, but you must run some form of firewall. I've heard it all, all the why's of not needing a firewall or having nothing on your computer that anyone would want. Here's the fact though, only fools don't have a firewall, especially when you can have one for free. ZoneAlarm free personal computer firewall is a software firewall that can be downloaded at: www.zonelabs.com/store/content/catalog/products/zonealarm/znaalm_details.jsp?lid=nav_zs

When you first set-up your firewall, the software will ask for permission before letting anything in or out of your computer. More plainly, your firewall is learning what is or is not okay with you. If it's a program you regularly use, then click yes and check the remember this next time box. If you do not recognize the program that the firewall tells you it is trying to connect to the internet, just say no! No wild clicking, you're smarter than that. I'm not merely speaking of firewalls here, but beware of anywhere on the Internet when you land on a website and some program wants to install. If a website tries to install software, it's most likely some form of spyware.

4. Anti-spyware. Spyware is the devil; you just don't know it. I won't even explain why, but your computer will eventually go crazy and crash. If you'd rather not fight pop-up windows and ads out the wazoo, as well as rewriting of your registry that you don't even realize is happening, then install spyware removal. Lavasoft Ad-aware freeware version at:

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www.lavasoftusa.com/software/adaware/
SpyBot Search & Destroy (free): www.safer-networking.org/index.php?page=download

The best plan is to use a combination of Ad-aware and Spybot to remove the offending spyware. Then let the spyware-detection systems do their job of constantly scanning incoming files, searching for potential spyware. This is the same method antivirus software uses to catch viruses. Check weekly for free updates to your anti-spyware.

One last free pest remover you might like to check out is a Trojan scanner: www.trojanscan.com/ Hint, this has nothing to do with safe sex. You don't even have to know the long technical definition of a Trojan, only that it's a cracker's, an evil hacker's, best friend and backdoor into your computer.

5. Spam-ugh! Need I say more, or do you enjoy the flood of junk in your email? This is definitely worth the bucks if you want to spring for the killer software, but here's a few freebies. Remember, you get what you pay for and you might like to try a few free trial versions of anti-spam software like:

I Hate Spam at:

www.sunbelt-software.com/product.cfm?id=930

Make It Stop at:

www.qurb.com/products/qurb-spam.php

No Spam at: www.no-spam-today.com/

Or a totally free version for Outlook/Outlook Express at: www.spamfighter.com/

Regarding email, a few more words of wisdom . . . do not open attachments! If you must, then you'd better have all of the above software running on your computer. If the email has a link to click, and you forward it to friends, did you realize that is a form of Denial of Service attack? Too many people clicking on a link, going to a website all at once, brings a site to its knees. Yes, you're hacking without knowing it; click click click until the site goes down from the flood.

Instead of forwarding anything in email, try copy and paste. Lastly, if you forward to groups in your address book, instead of listing everyone and their dog in the To line of email, give folks a break and use the Bcc line so people can keep their email addresses private. If you don't want to, then go ahead and tick off your friends . . . the spammers will love you for all the email addresses without any work to get them.

People, Bill Gates will not send you money if you forward email. The Taco Bell dog will not run across your screen if you forward email to ten people.

Before you send out something, be it warning or promise of wealth, why not check it out first at Truth or Fiction? <http://www.truthorfiction.com/>

When it comes to setting passwords, don't use words in the dictionary. It takes a cracking program about a blink and it has your password just that easily. For passwords, use characters or numbers interspersed within your password.

Finally, there are some great ways to guard your privacy. If you hate to leave your digital footprint every

place you click and you would like to surf anonymously, there are several software applications for such purposes. Many websites will be blocked, however, if you aren't using a fully paid version as opposed to a freebie.

Try Anonymizer for free: www.anonymizer.com/
Keep in mind, if you have something shady in mind, Anonymizer will give you up.

Try Steganos Internet Anonym at:
www.steganos.com/en/

None of you will use these applications to perform crimes, I'm sure, but they can be a great way to cruise cyberspace anonymously. Steganos Internet Anonym changes anonymous proxy servers every few seconds, keeping your connection 100 percent anonymous.

Don't be a digital pirate, an enemy of the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) by downloading free music, but if you insist, use PeerGuardian (free) to block the blacklisted IP addresses. <http://www.peer-guardian.com/>

Oh yeah, and those cracks for the free software . . . more than half of them have a Trojan in their code. Say hello to the backdoor into your computer for your friendly neighborhood hacker.

I almost hated to give away this little cyberspace secret, but I want you to be wise and advise. To run faster and cleaner, remember to go to Tools > Internet Options > Delete Temporary files, delete cookies, clear history. For occasional maintenance you could defrag under Programs > Accessories > System Tools > Disk Defragmenter.

Or, you could download a handy little program that the CIA uses called Window Washer.
www.webroot.com/wb/downloads/index.php

This little puppy is great! Try it on a free trial basis, for Windows if that is what operating system you use, or download MacWasher if you are a Mac user. If you set it up correctly, it will clean your slack space (no more defragging) and wipe away your tracks (writes 0's and 1's on your hard drive to clean your history.) This means no more dumping temporary Internet files, deleting cookies, or clearing history. Here's the catch; under Window Washer Options, add bleach to wash! That is the 0's and 1's I mentioned, bleaching is the beauty of this application, and you should set it to bleach a minimum of 10 times, but can go as high as 100 times if you are kind of paranoid or if you do some nefarious things.

You can set-up to run whenever you'd like and with whatever options you want it to wash, although I wouldn't advice bleaching your mail account or all your addresses will disappear. The added bonus is it keeps track of how much space you have freed up in memory. You'll be shocked to see the megabytes and then gigabytes you've cleaned out as your computer loves you and runs smoothly.

To sum it up, be wise. Get the five basic computer essentials to maintain your sanity and your computer's health. You have been warned.